DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 300 546 CE 051 124

TITLE Approaching Workforce Literacy.
INSTITUTION Business Council for Effective Literacy, New York, NY.
PUB DATE Apr 88
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
JOURNAL CIT BCEL Newsletter for the Business Community; n15 p1,4 Apr 1988

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; *Adult Literacy; *Cooperative Programs; Educational Cooperation; Educational Legislation; Illiteracy; *Labor Force Development; *Literacy Education; State Legislation; State Programs; *Statewide Planning
IDENTIFIERS Job Literacy

ABSTRACT

Profound changes in the structure of the workplace and in the nature of jobs now make reading, writing, and other communications skills vital to the performance of even entry-level jobs. However, massive numbers of present and future workers have only minimal or marginal proficiency in the basic skills. The problem will get worse as the labor pool continues to change--with members of minority groups, school dropouts, and refugees and immigrants making up an increasing portion of that pool. Some of the most significant new planning and thinking on work force literacy is occurring at the state level. One of the most wide-ranging and comprehensive plans developed to date is the Massachusetts Workforce Literacy Plan. Over three years, the plan proposes to expand the number of adults served from 45,000 to 100,000 annually and to link literacy to clearly defined job market needs. Illinois has been a model of comprehensive statewide literacy planning since 1984. It is now moving strongly into workplace literacy as a major component by launching a statewide public awareness and fundraising campaign for local programs. In New York, 11 projects are being funded under the new Workplace Literacy Program, with all of them being carried out under union sponsorship. Most projects involve collaboration among a range of organizational types. (Names and addresses of resource persons are provided.) (YLB)

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BCEL BUSINESS COUNCIL FOR EFFECTIVE LITERACY

ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMS • PLANNING • ISSUES

A Newsletter For The Business Community

NO. 15 APRIL 1988

APPROACHING WORKFORCE LITERACY

Cigarmaking In A Shop, 1873, *Practical Magazine*

In the 19th Century numerous jobs did not require reading or writing. The three men pictured above could roll cigars all day long without ever having to do either. This doesn't mean that they didn't appreciate reading or follow the latest news. On the contrary, those employees who could read regularly took an hour or so out of their workday to read aloud to their coworkers from newspapers, magazines, and books. To make sure that the reader did not lose part of his salary, each of the other men gave him a supply of finished cigars in exchange for his services. And all the men contributed to a fund for purchasing new reading materials.

Today, the role of reading in the workplace is a much more complicated matter. Profound changes in the structure of the workplace and in the nature of jobs now makes reading, writing, and other communications skills vital to the performance of even entry-level jobs. Research done at Indiana University has found that some 70 percent of the reading material in a cross section of jobs nationally is now between 9th-grade and 12th-grade difficulty (some 15 percent is even higher)–and it is likely that the job and social requirements for literacy will increase even more in the years ahead. The trouble is that massive numbers of present and future workers have only minimal or marginal proficiency in the basic skills.

It is estimated that some 90 percent of the workforce in 1990 and some 75 percent in the year 2000 will be made up of adults in the workforce now. Yet recent research suggests that as many as one of every eight current employees reads at no more than a 4th-grade level, and that one out of five only to 8th-grade level. This translates into about 14 million and 23 million workers respectively. And adding displaced workers and others in the pool of unemployed persons would swell the numbers substantially. Most experts stress that the problem will get even worse as the labor pool itself continues to change–with members of minority groups, school dropouts, and refugees and immigrants making up an increasing portion of that pool.

Both public and private organizations are beginning to recognize the urgency of this situation and the difficult challenge it represents for the nation. Among others, the U.S. Department of Labor, the National Governors' Association, and the Council of State Policy & Planning Agencies have all issued major reports on the subject in the last year. Numerous groups, including the Education Commission of the States, the National Association of Private Industry Councils, the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, and the National Alliance of Business are planning conferences, roundtables, or other events this year to examine workforce illiteracy. And last December, as part of the new funding appropriated for the federal Adult Basic Education program, Congress for the first time set aside $9.6 million for national demonstration projects in workforce literacy, with the funding to be available in the program year beginning in July.

Some of the most significant new planning and thinking on workforce literacy is occurring at the state level. To illustrate the varied forms that such initiatives can take, the approaches being taken in Massachusetts, Illinois, and New York are described below.

Massachusetts Workforce Literacy Plan

One of the most wide-ranging and comprehensive plans developed to date, the Massachusetts Workforce Literacy Plan was developed at the request of Governor Dukakis by a team of literacy experts, government and education agencies, and labor and business leaders. The plan proposes to expand the number of adults served by the state's literacy system from 45,000 to 100,000 annually over a three-year period. Initially, $6.5 million has been requested to begin implementing the program and some $50 million will be sought over the next five years. The plan is based on an in-depth analysis of the changing workforce needs in Massachusetts through the end of the next decade with careful attention given to those groups that will make up the majority of the workers by the turn of the century. According to state officials, by 1995 most jobs in the state will move from goods to service industries, requiring much higher levels of training, especially in language, math, and problem-solving skills. (cont'd. on p. 4)

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(cont'd. from p. 1)

The plan is groundbreaking in several ways. It is one of the first long-range planning models that links literacy to clearly-defined job market needs. It recognizes that literacy is part of a broader picture that includes a whole range of social problems such as teen pregnancy, substance abuse, incomplete schooling, and poverty. It recognizes the need to provide literacy services in a form and in places suitable to the total life circumstances of the people to be served. Literacy instruction will not be given in isolation but closely linked to specific job goals and supported by such essential services as counseling, childcare, and transportation. The plan also has an evaluation component so that service providers and planners will know what learning approaches and techniques work best.

Of special significance is that the Workforce Literacy Plan was developed and is actively backed by the broadest possible group of participants–including local and state government, state social service and welfare agencies, business and unions, literacy and educational groups, and community organizations of all kinds. Actual service provision will be built on the full range of services that already exist, including vocational training programs, supported-work programs, and intergenerational family learning projects. One of these is a network of Worker Assistance Centers which provides training to dislocated workers. Another is the Workplace Education Initiative, which funds several model workplace literacy projects under the sponsorship of the Executive Office of Economic Affairs, the Executive Office of Labor, and the Department of Education. State agencies that currently fund or provide services for the targeted groups are already working with a new Interagency Literacy Task Force to obtain new state and federal funding.

Seven groups, with skills at the lowest through post-high-school levels, have been targeted by the state for the three-year effort: immigrants and refugees who need English language and basic skills; AFDC recipients who need entry-level basic skills training; mothers of young children to improve their standards of living and teach them to upgrade their children's education; male high school dropouts between the ages of 16 and 24 who can't qualify for entry-level jobs; low-income workers who need better skills to move ahead in their companies; potentially-dislocated workers to help them adapt to new technology and to prevent more layoffs and plant closings; and displaced workers who need retraining to qualify for new jobs.

(For further information, contact Sondra Stein, Deputy Director, Coalition for Literacy Campaign, 100 Nashua St., Boston, MA 02114 (617) 727-5717.)

Toward A Literate Society In Illinois

Under the leadership of Secretary of State and State Librarian Jim Edgar, Illinois has been a model of comprehensive statewide literacy planning since 1984. The state is now moving strongly into workplace literacy as a major component of its overall effort. "I do not believe any large employer can safely say that 100 percent of his or her employees have reading skills adequate to function efficiently and productively in today's technical workplace," Secretary Edgar notes. He advocates programs that bring educators directly into the workplace: "It is a lot easier to motivate someone to read if they can see direct practical benefits in their day-to-day work."

The Illinois Literacy Council, a 36-member group with wide representation, has mounted a massive statewide public awareness and fundraising campaign for local workplace literacy programs. At present, according to material just issued by the Council, more than 400 businesses throughout the state are supporting such programs with funding and in-kind help. Moreover, since 1985 the Secretary's Literacy Grant Program has appropriated $10 million for more than 250 local and regional groups involving public/private partnerships between businesses and local literacy programs. The combined effort is reaching some 25,000 new adult learners and it has trained 20,000 volunteer tutors.

Officials of the state effort recently cited eight projects that are already producing good results. One of them is a partnership between the Rockford Area Literacy Council and a Pillsbury/Green Giant plant, in which basic skills are provided to employees. Another, at a Chrysler assembly plant, offers high-school-equivalency preparation and English language instruction. Highland Community College in Freeport has developed off-site courses to help workers at the Kelly-Springfield Tire Company read technical manuals and to help employees at Micro Switch keep up with changing technologies there. Seventeen libraries in one county are working with some 70 area businesses on a range of different projects–one to teach English and basic skills to foreign-born housekeepers and kitchen helpers in a nursing home. Other projects involve collaborations between a union and a education agency in Peoria and among a literacy program, the departments of streets and utilities, and the Mayor's Office in Springfield.

As with Massachusetts, one of the notable features of the Illinois workplace literacy effort is the range of different organizational types involved, creativity in forging new linkages, and an understanding that the basic skills are best provided in a context that has direct meaning to people in their everyday lives.

(For more information contact Susan Grimes, Secretary of State's Literacy Office, Illinois State Library, 431 Fourth Street, Springfield, IL 62701 (217) 785-6925.)

Workplace Literacy in New York

Last year New York Telephone had to process 57,000 applications to find 2,000 qualified entry-level workers. Eastman Kodak reports that some 10,000 of its employees do not have the basic skills needed to implement the organizational and technological changes required to make the company more competitive. Recognizing that the problems faced by these two companies are not isolated cases, in early 1987 the New York State Legislature enacted a bill which provided $2 million in new funding for workplace literacy projects in the state. The effort grew out of the State Education Department's active and long-standing role in the nation's adult basic education affairs as well as its broader interests in statewide economic development.

Eleven projects are being funded under the new "Workplace Literacy Program," with all being carried out under union sponsorship. Individual grants range from $50,000 to $950,000. Most of the projects involve collaboration among a range of organizational types. For example, in the largest project, the New York City Central Labor Council and Consortium for Worker Education are working with the City University and the Board of Education to provide basic skills services to AFL-CIO affiliated unions. Another project is training instructors to work on a one-to-one basis with learning-disabled workers. UAW-Chrysler, the Greater Syracuse Labor Council, and UAW 854 have teamed up to work with a school, Literacy Volunteers of Syracuse, an area BOCES program, and the public library to provide literacy instruction at several manufacturing plants in the Syracuse area. At Delco Products, a General Motors affiliate, IUE Local 509 is working with two BOCES programs in a skill development program geared to new technology demands in the automotive industry. And one project, with the Civil Service Employees Association, is providing basic skills instruction to state and local government employees.

A key goal of the New York demonstration effort is to use its grants to leverage additional public and private funding for the projects. The state's Employment Preparation Education program (EPE) is a major source of public matching funds. Companies involved are matching state grants with substantial in-kind services, which include payment of released-time wages. At Delco Products, released-time wages are estimated at nearly $215,000, and Chrysler's in-kind services are valued at some $168,000. According to an official of the State Education Department, "a number of programs...have developed comprehensive approaches in which EPE state aid supports the costs of basic skills instruction for workers who lack a diploma; a State workplace literacy grant provides basic skills instruction for workers who lack basic skills but have a high school diploma; and State Employer-Specific Short-Term Training funds and negotiated company/union dollars are used to pay for specific occupational skills training once workers have mastered the basic skills."

These activities are viewed by state planners as a first step. Plans are being developed to expand workplace literacy services in a variety of ways. At present the Division of Adult and Continuing Education, the State AFL-CIO, the New York State Business Council, and the State Department of Labor are working together on a statewide application for substantial federal funding. The state is also looking at ways to broaden eligibility requirements for EPE funding, provide further technical assistance, foster job-related curriculum development activities, and meet the in-service training needs of teachers and program managers.

(For more information contact Garrett Murphy, Assistant Commissioner, Occupational and Continuing Education, State Education Department, USNY, Albany, NY 12234.)